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AUTHOR Morse, J. Mitchell
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ABSTRACT

With the growing belief that any style of speaking and writing is as good as any other, English teachers must, on the one hand, admit the connection of so-called "correct" English with snob appeal, and, on the other, defend the intellectual and aesthetic superiority of clear, well-written English and learn to express contempt for circular arguments and vague expression. Otherwise, students, in their disaffection with the properties of language, will destroy the good with the bad. Teachers must present the sound, simple reasons for using the valid "correct" forms and for "maintaining what is left of the traditional clarity, brevity, precision, and force of the English language." They must point out that language is an instrument of perception as well as expression, for a poorly expressed idea is a poorly understood one. What is essential is to arouse an emotional concern for clarity and precision. If teachers fail to establish in students this understanding of and respect for skill in language usage, the students will be lured into extreme positions of opposing unreason with unreason rather than with rational thought, positions which can ultimately damage our contemporary civilization. (LH)

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# WHY WRITE LIKE A COLLEGE GRADUATE?

By J. Mitchell Morse

We English teachers have always been subject to populist scorn and suspicion, and today the difficulty of our work is compounded by the populists' growing confidence that they are right and by our growing realization that they are not altogether wrong. And nevertheless, with regard to the uses of language, they are, basically, fundamentally, in principle and in most applications, wrong. The more their confidence grows, the wronger they are--and the more complicated the problem of teaching their naive followers becomes. What must we do to counteract the old populist scorn of verbal precision now that it is supported by a resumption of the reactionary nineteenth-century campaign to derange our senses and hallucinate our perceptions? How must we treat the old servile need to be intellectually harmless now that it is complicated once again by the recurrent mystical need to be mentally drunk? How can we help students develop an ear for good language, a respect for the skill of good writers, a desire to write skillfully themselves, now that their vocabulary is atrophied, their syntax crippled, and their prosody non-existent?

In Marguerite Duras' novel Moderato Cantabile a piano teacher shows a little boy how to play a passage but he refuses even to put his hands on the keyboard. "You'll never learn to play the piano if you don't try," says the teacher. "I don't want to learn to play the piano," says the boy; and the situation is such that we sympathize equally with both. As English teachers we are up against a psychological problem analogous to that of the piano teacher. We need to develop sympathy, tact, and that inner authority which no outer authority can replace. We must also polish up our neglected arrogance. In many cases the populists' arguments deserve serious consideration and action; in other cases neither their arguments nor their motives deserve anything but contempt--an attitude which, since we are painfully unaccustomed to it, we must wilfully cultivate. "Sir," said Dr. Johnson, "treating your adversary

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with respect is giving him an advantage to which he is not entitled." Thus he made clear a disadvantage we devotees of language and literature suffer in arguing with disingenuous enemies of language and literature, who fear nothing so much as the disinterested sensitivity to intellectual quality we try to develop in our students. We must throw off this unfair disadvantage. We must stop trying to accommodate our discipline to the unaccommodating; we must stop trying to come to a reasonable understanding with the unreasonable; we must stop trying to come to terms with the interminable. For in our arguments with them we too enjoy an unfair advantage: we are right. Moreover, our poor innocent mixed-up students are not our intellectual equals; we must no longer listen to them as if they were, and we must try to strengthen the spines of our colleagues who do.

All inner authority flows from sympathy. We must be aware of the strong points in our adversaries' position; we must state their arguments more clearly and forcefully than they themselves are able to state them; this is easy enough to do, and the very doing of it demonstrates the superior strength of our own position: a position worked out with full awareness of what is valid in linguistic populism and what is not. Such awareness makes the difference between authority and authoritarianism.

One of our neighbors recently called out to another, who was sitting in a lawn chair behind a hedge, "Who are you hiding from?" Is there anybody in the English-speaking world who really thinks he should have said, "From whom are you hiding?"? If so, I hope that unfortunate person is not an English teacher. One Sunday afternoon while our car was being gassed up I walked into the filling station and asked--asked--well, I started to ask, "Have you any flashlight batteries?" But then I thought I'd better speak the language of the people to whom I was speaking, I mean like talk the language of the guys I was talking to, so I asked, "Have you got any flashlight batteries?"

If I had any skill with the techniques of avant-garde fiction I could convey the simultaneity of all this, but fiction requires as special a talent as poetry--think

of the brilliant expository prose and the cardboard fiction of C. P. Snow, Mary McCarthy, Edmund Wilson, James Baldwin, George Orwell and John Hershey--so here goes with the plain old brilliant expository prose. While waiting for the batteries I thought of a story of Valery Larbaud, who enjoyed speaking the language of whatever country he was in, with an accent, idiom and intonation appropriate to his interlocutor. Once a Belgian train conductor said to him, "You speak French very well, for a Frenchman. I mean, you speak it without an accent--like us. You don't Frentify it--vous ne le frantisez pas." I was trying to follow Larbaud's example, but I didn't quite make. For my interlocutor . . . You see what I mean? "Interlocutor," he says. With a vocabulary like that there, how the hell can you talk natural? . . . Now where was I? I mean, like where the fuck was I at? . . . Why was I trying to talk like the filling station man, anyhow? My idiom is as natural to me as his is to him, and in my vain effort to talk like him I was putting on airs. . . . So my interlocutor turned to his partner and said, "Whur's the flashlight battries at?" That's wonderful, I thought in my pedantic way: a sentence of five and a half words, with two mispronunciations and two grammatical errors; but his partner immediately topped it by pointing to a box and uttering a sentence of two and a half words with three grammatical errors: "Them's them."

Grammatical errors? The communication was perfect. I got the batteries. What more is speech supposed to do? What more can it do than convey information perfectly? Ah, but it also conveys another kind of information: it tells us who the speaker is. That is the unmentionable fact in our freshman English classes. The man who said "Them's them" has been communicating whatever he wanted to communicate all his life with no difficulty whatever, and now his son is in college and has blackened the wrong spaces on the placement-test answer sheet so we tell him his English won't do and we put him in a no-credit remedial English course. By so doing, we create what our journalists call a credibility gap. His English has always done. Why the hell won't it do? His gentle girl-graduate instructor would never dream of telling him. Perhaps she herself has never had the courage to know. So she says, "Well, if you

write incorrectly you won't be able to do college work: you won't pass your other courses." What is theoretically true. But at their next interview he shows a history bluebook full of grammatical errors, misspellings, incoherencies, statements that say the opposite of what he obviously meant to say, and inaccuracies of vocabulary that make make many of his grammatical statements meaningless--and it bears the grade Bf BThe awarding of that grade was of course a crime against the university and against society, if not against the student himself, but I suppose we all know by now that it does no good to urge our colleagues in other departments to insist on good English. What is good English, anyhow? With all his bad English, the student did in fact indicate to the history teacher's satisfaction that his information was 80 percent correct; and was the teacher to grade him less than 80 percent correct because he said, "The colonys had to fight for independent when the parlment encroched the rights weather the wanted to or not"? Or even, "The sothern colonys would not fight the yanky officers ordring the men around so it was lucky it was Geo Washington comander in cheif then the fought because he was the best one it was politics"? If the history teacher, remembering his own lecture, can figure out what the student intended to say, and if the information seemsstoohim not wrong wrong--i.e., if he believes that the student was trying to say that the choice of George Washing as commander-in-chief was a political choice intended to secure the adherence of the Southern colonies, but that it was nevertheless a fortunate choice because he was probably the best man for the job--then should the teacher refuse to admit that the student has this information? Or that--though he hasn't stated it clearly--he seems to have it about right, say at a guess 80 percent right? Let me say at once, lest there be any misapprehension, that at Temple University, and I should think at most other universities no student who continues to write like that can get through, because unless he learns to write with reasonable clarity he will never get out of English R and never be allowed to take English 1, which does after all assume a higher level of accomplishment. Few cases are so bad, anyhow. But many are almost that bad, and it does no good to ask our colleagues in other departments to make

common cause with us for decent standards of written and spoken English. We can and do argue that a student whose language is muddled cannot have a very clear understanding of anything that has to be put into words. We can and do refer to Peirce's statement, "It is wrong to say that . . . good language is <u>important</u> to good thought, merely; for it is of the essence of it."+ We can and do point out that if a student writing an undergraduate English term paper on Milton should get his historical facts wrong it would lower his grade, no matter how sensitive to Milton's language he might be. All our arguments are useless. Our colleagues in other departments do in fact make not only a valid distinction between information and the language in which it is conveyed, but also a quite invalid distinction between thought and the language that constitutes it. So that we must undertake alone the hard job of clarifying our students' language and the thought it constitutes.

There are two reasons for using the so-called "correct" forms of English, one good and one bad. Our students are vaguely aware of the bad one and totally unaware of the good one. We must overcome our reluctance and face whatever danger there may be and show them that we too are aware of the bad one and that we scorn it as much as any of them and more than some of them. Then we must show them the good one and convince them of its value.

The bad one is of course the snob appeal of the so-called "correct" forms. Why should the filling station man not have said "Them's them"? What should he have said? "Those are they"? "There they are"? "Them's them" is better, not only for its effectiveness as what Thorstein Veblen calls "direct and forcible speech," but even for its integrity of form. Its purely literary value, in terms of euphony, concision, balance and emphasis, is much higher than that of eigher of the two alternatives I have mentioned. But its social value is very low indeed. To say "Them's them," except as a joke, is a social error. It is lower class. I shall not go into the reasons, which have been clearly set forth by Veblen in <u>The Theory of the Leisure Class</u> /Modern Library edition, n.d., pp. 45-46, 398-400/, by J. Vendryes in <u>Language</u> /Barnes & Noble edition, 1951, pp. 239-244/, by Richard Robinson in

Definition /Oxford, 1954, pp. 37-38, 56/, and by Nancy Mitford in Noblesse Oblige /Harper, 1956, passim/, among others. Suffice it here to recall the fact that from the social point of view one usage is "correct" and another "incorrect" for the same reason that one way of holding a fork is "correct" and another "incorrect": the "correct" way is the way of the upper and upper middle classes. Our universities have traditionally assumed and taught the English of those classes; many of our students not resent this fact, and I for one will not say they are wrong. Some of the best, kindest, most intelligent and most effective people I know--good friends, good neighbors, good spouses, good parents, good citizens, and economically quite well off, thank you--don't speak "correct" English, have never read a line of Shakespeare, and have never heard of Plato. On the other hand, we all know some real drips whose speech and writing, though neither vigorous nor beautiful, are absolutely "correct," and who exclude "incorrect" speakers and writers from all human consideration. It behooves us to remember that T. S. Eliot's world ended with a sneer. Our profession is damaged by teachers who share none of Eliot's talents except the one for sneering. With whatever small degree of justice, large numbers of students now associate our insistence on the "correct" forms with social snobbery. This is a fact we must all be increasingly aware of; the problems it creates should be matters of the most serious, urgent concern to the National Council of Teachers of English, the College English Association, the Modern Language Association, the International Association of University Professors of English, and other professional bodies--matters not for years or decades of leisurely research--whose data will be out of date by the time they are published, so that more research will be necessary because of course we wouldn't want to act on the basis of out-of-date date--but for immediate, practical, effective action: for if we don't soon solve the problems, or soon help the students solve them, they will soon solve them in their own way--and we won't like the solutions.

We won't like them because the students in their disaffection with all properties of language will destroy the valid along with the silly, the useful along with

the useless, the good along with the bad. Therefore, we cannot afford the indulgence of phony corporate solutions couched in what Walker Gibson calls committee neutralese and adorned with graphs to make them still less readable: we must present our own good simple reasons for maintaining what is left of the traditional clarity, beauty, precision and force of the English language and regaining as much as possible of what has recently been lost.

Above the level of remedial English, most of our students' mistakes are not lapses of grammar or of linguistic decorum but inaccuracies of vocabularies. At a recent meeting of my graduate seminar in contemporary experimental writers, a student spoke of Robbe-Grillet's "cosmology." When I asked what he meant, since Robbe-Grillet isn't concerned with cosmology, he said, "You know--his world view." When I pointed out that the vague term "world view," whatever it may mean, certainly doesn't mean cosmology, which has to do with the nature of the cosmos or universe, the position of the earth in space, the motion of the planets, etc., he shrugged and continued as if I had made a vain distinction where there was really no difference. Perhaps he thought, "As long as you know what I mean, what difference does it make whether I say 'cosmology' or 'world view'?" But I hadn't known what he meant. I had been baffled by a misleading word, just as I would have been baffled if he had tried to indicate a chair by the word "table." I was embarrassed to make such an elementary distinction, but he wasn't embarrassed at all. I assumed that the other students also had been baffled by the sentence, but since the whole issue was a digression I didn't belabor it; afterwards, however, it occurred to me that perhaps two or three of them had not been baffled: that having been long habituated to cloudy imprecision, in which words mean whatever we vaguely want them to mean, they had vaguely inferred from the context the general drift, and the general drift had been enough. I know that that was not the case with most of the students, but even in graduate classes now there are some who I fear have become incapable of distinguishing one idea from another: i.e., of clearly understanding any idea, or even of feeling a need to understand it clearly. And I am afraid this relaxed habit of mind is spreading. The

first time a graduate student told me he took Madame Blavatsky's Isis Unveiled seriously, I laughed and didn't believe it; but now we know only too well that theosophy is as popular as astrology and the Tarot cards. My chief objection to such sideshow stuff is that it blows their vocabularies. Logicians from Aristotle onward have been concerned over the effects on our thought of nouns for which there are no corresponding objects--not only of names for abstractions, such as animal, tool and liquid, and for nonentities, such as gallon, mile and hour, but even more of names for mythical beings, such as chimaera, sphinx, unicorn, leprechaun, kobold, mermaid, siren and virgin. By using such nouns, we fill our private world with nonexistent objects: we create for ourselves delusions and even on occasion hallucinations. As Dostoievsky says somewhere, the question is not whether we believe that ghosts are seen, but whether we believe that they exist. How can a person perceive the world clearly, or--which is even more important--write clearly, if his head is full of karma and dharma and he therefore believes that the world is full of them too? The elementary logical distinction between words and things, which students often forget in the haste or heat or agony or indifference of composition, disappears entirely when they blow their minds--i.e., their vocabularies--with such paltry stuff. The ways of genius are of course unaccountable: a Blake or a Yeats, having absolute and as it were instinctive command of language, can create beauty from nothing more than his own delusions; but a person whose command of language is shaky--who says, for example, and I quote, that a man of integrity is "integrious" and that meat-eating is "dilatorious" to the health--would do better to stay within the generous limits of the observable and the demonstrable.

To the extend that we think in words, language is an instrument of perception as well as of expression. A thought we can't express is one we don't quite understand, not having worked it out. Working it out involves constructing it as a sentence or a series of sentences. If we lack the appropriate words, and have little skill in the syntactic arrangement of such words as we have, not only can we not express nuances of thought and feeling, we can't even experience them. To the extent that we think in

words, the quality of our thought inheres in that of our language; and all truths above the level of proverbs (which as Coleridge observed are frequently not true anyhow) are of the nature of nuances. The English language, having absorbed words, roots, prefixes, infixes and suffixes from many others, is rich, not poor; but in order to enjoy its riches we must command them. To be able to say "glad," "happy," "gay" and "joyful," "fortunate," "lucky," "happy" and "felicitous," "wish," "want," "desire" and "crave," "watch," "look at," "observe," "contemplate" and "regard," "under," "underneath," "beneath" and "below," "over," "above," "atop" and "on top of," "incomplete," "uncompleted" and "unfinished," "kin," "relatives" and "family," "number," "quantity" and "amont," "deadly," "mortal" and "fatal," "spell," "hex" and "enchantment," "kingly," "royal" and "regal," "vow" and "swear," "vow" and "oath," "right" and "just," "freedom" and "liberty," "sleeping" and "dormant," "drowsing" and "dozing," "impossible" and "not possible," "dangerous" and "hazardous," "risky" and "chancy," "less" and "fewer," "partly" and "partially," "fully," "completely," "wholly," "entirely," "altogether" and "absolutely"--to be able to choose from two or more combinations of connotations, rhythms and tone colors, as well as among niceties of denotation--makes writing and speaking well a joy. Needless to say, we are not born with a desire for this particular joy. It must be cultivated and acquired. Helping our students cultivate and acquire it is difficult at best; we must not make it more difficult by hobbling each other with prescriptions and prosriptions. Since enthusiasm on our part is absolutely essential, each of us must be free to teach in his or her own way, and we must respect our individual differences. My own predilection being what it is, to most of my students the joy of playing with sentence patterns seems to come more easily than that of distinguishing between "perhaps" and "maybe"; but my colleague Howard Meroney, in his graduate seminar in English philology, has his students try to establish doubtful etymologies; they work with a wide range of lexicons and etymological dictionaries, starting with what they call "kid stuff like Skeat" and proceeding to Holthausen, Kluge, Walde and others;

and in their conversation out of class they refer to these exercises so often, and always with such enthusiasm, that it is quite evident that they suffer joy. Part of their joy is also quite evidently due to their admiration of Meroney, and I am not suggesting that any number of etymological dictionaries can take the place of an excellent teacher. But I myself still remember the thrill--the rush of blood to the face, the tingling in the scalp--I experienced on first looking into Skeat. "This," I thought, "is something like reading Finnegans Wake!" And my friend Dr. George Cannon, whose interests have to do with medicine, education and the race problem rather than with philology, once told me that he still remembers with pleasure, every time he passes a stone wall, a high school textbook, Trench's The History of Words, from which he learned among other things that "dilapidation" comes from "dis" and "lapis, lapidis," and means the falling or removal of stones from a wall.

What I am suggesting is that we stop underestimating our students and make the necessary effort to arouse in them an emotional concern for clarity and precision--if possible, even a passion for clarity and precision. For at the moment all the passion seems to be on the other side. We face what my wife calls a raging fire of unreason: a hatred of all that we and our discipline stand for, a terrible emotional need to destroy thought as the enemy of feeling, deliberation as the enemy of action, and liberal reform as a deception, a means of avoiding significant change. The Supreme Court's unhappy phrase "with all deliberate speed" has in fact been used as an excuse for indecent deliberation in ending a policy that ruins people's lives; and the indecent deliberators, falsely identifying everything decent with Communism, have in fact been driving more and more of those who oppose racism into the welcoming and constraining arms of Moscow's and Peking's agents--who, alas, are themselves racists, whether by conviction or from opportunism is of no importance. More and more of our students are beginning to fight racism with racism, repression with repression, unreason with unreason, befuddlement with befuddlement. We must not permit ourselves to be pushed like them into the intolerable position of having to choose between Strom Thurmond and LeRoi Jones, for such a dilemma invites mental

breakdown. We must try unceasingly to rescue them from it.

Theoretically our colleagues in science and technology should defend and promote intellectual clarity, but actually there is no reason to believe that a majority of them will; theoretically we in the humanities should also defend and promote the qualities that distinguish our species from those that act without thinking, but actually there is no reason to believe that the majority of us will. In any crisis, most of us turn out to be morally timid. It therefore remains for us of the rational, humane and unintimidated minority, not only in English but in all the other disciplines as well, to defend civilization in our own ways and with our own weapons as long as we can. Let us remember, moreover, a lesson from Finnegans Wake: that is was not the raffish Gracehoper but the well-barbered Ondt, a genteel opportunist ready to join in whatever tendency seemed most likely to prevail, who said, "What a zeit for the goths!" /FW 415.26./ Then, if civilization does go down in incoherence, we will have no cause to feel guilty. We will have defended it to the last unsplit infinitive.

As for the Ondt, his politic defection to the goths with their populist "relevance" will do him no good. For when some glue-sniffing baggage handler puts his suitcase on the wrong plane once too often, or some error-prone computer once too often threatens to sue for payment of a bill he has already paid, he will get an ulcer. His doctor, knowing no physiology because he prescribed his own relevant curriculum of groovy courses and hired his own dreamy teachers, will diagnose it as . ... you know, like appendicitis. The Ondt will then be taken, in like an ambulance thrown together by drop-out mechanics high on pot, toward like a bridge built by theosophical engineers innocent of math, physics and the strength of materials, on the other side of which are like a hospital designed by freaked-out architects who majored in psychedelic design and forgot to put in elevators, and like a hashish-smoking surgeon who knows no anatomy.